What is an Earthworm?

Earthworms are found in sub-tropical parts of the world where it is neither too hot, nor too cold. They are small cold-blooded animals, also known as nightcrawlers and red wrigglers. The scientific name of the earthworm is *Lumbricus terrestris.* Earthworms have been aptly termed eco-system engineers by scientists for the vital part they play in soil management across the globe, which ultimately enables the growth of healthy plants.

Physical Appearance

Earthworms are invertebrates and can therefore move in any direction. They are a cylindrical shape and their average length is between 5 to 8 centimetres. Rings, known as segments, make up their external body structure. Every earthworm has more than 100 segments, irrespective of their size. When earthworms hatch from their cocoons, they are a whitish tinge, however after several weeks, they become reddish-brown. Given that these animals do not have eyes, they use their sensitive skins to guide the direction of their movement.

Diet

The diet of earthworms is large. These animals are capable of eating their own body weight in food every day. Earthworms are omnivores, eating mostly decomposed plant and animal organic matter. They even eat cardboard. Generally, earthworms do not like to eat citrus fruits due to high levels of acidity stored in them, nor do they like to consume cooked meat. Like birds, earthworms do not have teeth. Instead, both animals use their gizzards to grind food down, aided by small consumed pebbles, for easier digestion. Unlike birds however, earthworms can only find food on or beneath the surface of the ground. Given their varied diet, earthworms excrete castings which, when mixed with rainwater, provide natural fertiliser for plants.

Habitat

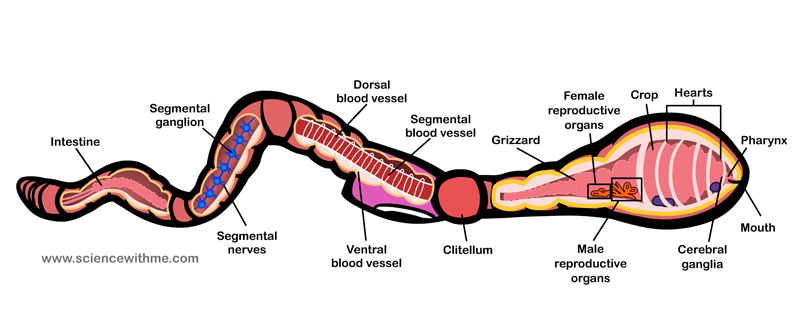
Perfect conditions for earthworms to survive comfortably are in moist, dark places. Whilst they mainly live in burrows in the soil, earthworms are also found under rotting logs, concrete slabs and other dark places where they are easily accessible to decomposing food supplies. When earthworms wriggle through the soil, their movement breaks up soil particles allowing soil to breathe and rainwater to trickle through.

Protection

Earthworms, whilst vulnerable animals, are able to protect themselves in a variety of ways. Their sensitive skin enables them to move away quickly from light, as too much light exposure will paralyse or even kill them. When earthworms are touched or prodded, they will wrap themselves into a tight coil. Bristles on earthworms, known as ‘setae’, help them cling to the surrounding soil when predators, such as birds, attempt to pull them out of the ground.

Conclusion

Although earthworms are small, they are vital for the survival of healthy soil eco-systems around the world. These creatures recycle decomposed plant matter, in turn, fertilizing soil in a natural, environmentally friendly way. We can all help earthworms in the critically important job that they do by setting up and maintaining our own worm farms to avoid the use of chemical fertilizers on our plants to help protect our planet both now and for future generations to come.

**Diagram of the Earthworm**

By Helen Withy